

## Music Documentaries: the Black experience

*“Film has provided a most salient medium for the visual representation of African American subjects” (Ramsey 166).*

The Black musical tradition spans from hymns sung by enslaved Blacks during the initial construction of the United States to the to current, global phenomenon of hip hop. The Black musical tradition includes, call and response, cultural response to rhythm and percussion (both cultural retentions from Africa) and the social, economic and political circumstances which often informs the artist’s work.

Since the inception of film production, Black music transformed from an oratory medium and temporarily encapsulated on celluloid. Films specifically in the documentary genre capture the essence of black music. Culturally critic, James A. Snead notes the following:

“Even in it’s infancy of motion pictures, it was obvious that film, as a way of perceiving reality opened up entirely new perceptual possibilities, giving the eye an augmented sense of visual mastery over its surroundings, preserving events in motion for a seemingly unlimited number of future replay, performing a wide variety of functions: educations, propagandistic, recreational, aesthetic” (Ramsey 166).

Regardless of form or content, documentary films featuring Black music are comprised of several thematic conventions. They include the following:

- Origin
- Ideas of community
- Mainstream appeal
- double consciousness mainstream vs. subculture
- Cultural identity crisis
- Music as a venue got get out of poverty
- Authenticity or romantic notions of the past – what is
- Nostalgia
- Cultural memory and transformation

The aforementioned conventions are depicted in several sub-genres:

- Concert docs
- Artist portrait
- Genre study
- Biopic

As of 2004, the biopic genre has gained attention through Jamie Fox’s Oscar winning portrayal of departed rhythm and blues pianist and singer, Ray Charles. With its star

studded cast, *Ray*, directed by Taylor Hackford, acquired \$20,039,730 in its first weekend.<sup>i</sup> Although the film is based on the life of Charles, *Ray* followed the classic, three act, narrative structure -- setup, conflict, and denouement. In films portraying African American musicians, such as *Lady Sings The Blues* dramatizing the life of jazz legend Billie Holiday, *What's Love Gotta Do With It* (1993) featuring the life of pop music icon, Tina Turner and the upcoming Blockbuster, *Dreamgirls*, adapted from the stage play and loosely based on the seminal R&B group, the Supremes, the protagonist, once existing in humble economic circumstances, rise above all obstacles, engage in self destructive behavior or external obstacles, crash and then prepare for their ultimate comeback.

Two year's after *Ray*, concert documentary's also received consideration from critics with the release of Jay-Z's, *Fade to Black* (2005) and *Dave Chappelle's Block Party* (2005). A long way from traditional documentaries featuring static (or very few) camera(s) recording the concert edited with artist interviews as seen in *Nina Simone: Live from Ronnie Scott's* (1985), *Fade to Black* and *Block Party* captures the events from behind stage as well as on the scenes.

"Everybody knows about Mississippi, Goddam!" – Nina Simone

In *Fade to Black* and *Block Party*, Jay-Z and Dave Chappelle use their celebrity in different ways. *Fade to Black* is produced as Jay-Z's retirement spectacle. As part of his last efforts as a recording artist, the rapper and uber hip hop mogul, prepared the concert abundant with (very famous) special guest. The film is also a monument to the first hip hop concert to sold out at in minutes at New York's Madison Square Garden since the 1980s.

"Whoever knew that hip hop can take it this far?" – Jay-Z

Dave Chappelle's concert documentary occurred for no apparent reason. The comedian simply wanted to gather his favorite artists (not as famous as the artists who appeared in Jay-Z's concert) in a secret location in bed-stuy Brooklyn, NY.

Although different, both concert documentaries explores the process of producing documentaries and what the genre means to each media giant. For Jay-Z, his concert is proof that hip hop can be a political and economic force. Sean Carter, AKA Jay-Z reveals that he can bow out of "the game" gracefully and retire while he is on the top of hip hop and pop culture. Chappelle simply loves music. He has often said that he admired the artists such as Jill Scott, The Fugees and Mos Def before he became know for his Comedy Central hit, aptly title, the Dave Chappelle Show. While recording the concert footage, the film audience catches a glimpse of Chappelle lip-synching to the performances. Chappelle offers insights regarding what made the concert possible. He gathers interviews from the owners from the infamous Broken Angel house, Notorious B.I.G's preschool teacher, as well as clandestine pop group, the Fugees. The artists also divulge information about Chappelle. Drummer and music director, Questlove?, explains the Chappelle has a great ear when playing the piano – almost in the same vain as the great jazz masters.

Musical genre study or examination often takes an anthological approach. Edward Bland's, *Cry of Jazz* (1959), discusses the reappropriation of jazz by white culture. The film uses dramatic reenactments and found footage of everyday Black folks and the larger American culture. For African Americans seeking political, social and economic freedom, the late 1950s and 1960s became nationalistic. In *The Impact of Black Nationalist Ideology on American Jazz Music of the 1960s and 1970s*, jazz culture critic, John D. Baskerville notes:

Cultural nationalist believed that members of the African Diaspora possessed a distinct cultural heritage that originated on the African continent. Cultural nationalists contented that before global black liberation could be attained...people of African descent...had to reassert and embrace their cultural heritage and eliminate all alien cultural influences (37).

Another genre examination is fashion photographer, David LaChapelle's *Rize* (2005). LaChapelle's film observes African American teens living in South Central Los Angeles. *Rize* demonstrates how hip hop music and dance, especially clowning and krumping has helped the poor community plagued with gang violence, drugs and police brutality. In most documentaries content informs cinematic techniques. However, LaChapelle appropriated his high fashion aesthetic for the gritty documentary showcasing the urban sprawl. The filmmaker often renders his subjects as objects as aesthetically pleasing with the use of slow motion and moisture on their well-contoured bodies.

Black music documentaries often cater to an audience unfamiliar with Black music or the African Diaspora. Time is often re-organized in music documentaries via fragmented editing. For example, in the Dave Chappelle's *Block Party*, the film begins with the actual concert and continued with interviews and b-roll of Chappelle preparing for the concert. The non-linear format expresses the re-occurring theme that is present in the films – Black life (generally) is composed of uncontrollable circumstances; make something from nothing.

Nina Simone: Live from Ronnie Scott's (1985)  
Lady Sings the Blues (1972)  
What's Love Gotta to Do With it (1993)  
Ray (2004)  
Rize (2005)  
Dave Chappell's block party (2005)  
Jay-Z fade to black (2006)  
Cry of Jazz (1959)  
Lengua: the Best of Bob Marley and The Wailers (2003)  
Jimi Hendrix: Electric Ladyland (1997)

#### Works Cited

Baskerville, John D. The Impact of Black Nationalist Ideology on American Jazz Music of the 1960s and 1970s. Lewiston, NY: The Edwin Mellen Press, 2003.

Ramsey, Guthrie. Race music: black cultures from bebop to hip-hop. Berkeley: University for California Press, 2003.

<sup>i</sup> <http://movies.about.com/od/ray/a/raybo110104.htm>